

# VISALIA TIMES-DELTA

## Skin art can be risky without the right precautions Know the facts before you get a tattoo or piercing

By David Castellon

Staff writer – Visalia Times-Delta- August 26, 2006

Whether you want your girlfriend's name on your arm, Jesus and angels on your back, buxom girls on the legs, a devil on your abdomen or a butterfly in a more intimate spot, how happy you'll be with your tattoo will depend a lot on the skills of the artist.

But artistic skill is only part of good tattoo artists — as well as people who apply permanent makeup and body piercings — bring to the table, said Steve Haston, a tattoo artist for 13 years and owner of Leopard Ink, a tattoo and body piercing parlor on Mooney Boulevard in Visalia.

"We're breaking the skin," he said.

And that's hundreds or thousands of times in the case of tattoos, and each time people get the body art applied, they can be vulnerable to any number of diseases or infections.

They include strains of hepatitis, HIV and other blood-borne diseases, according to the Mayo Clinic Web site on health risks from tattooing and piercings. Other risks include allergic reactions to inks, skin infections and triggering of skin disorders that include keloids, which are large raised scars.

Michael "Spanky" Wilson, a Tulare tattoo artist, recalled that a few years ago when a man came in asking to have a botched home tattoo job on his leg redone. But the leg was swollen and clearly infected.

"I told him to get to the hospital," he said. "It was so messed up."

He has also heard cases of people who contracted hepatitis, lockjaw and other ailments from tattoos and piercings. As such, Wilson, Haston and others involved in applying tattoos, body piercings and permanent makeup, which is applied with needles in the same manner as tattoos, say the people who do these procedures need to take precautions — and so do the people who get the work done.

"I'm perforating the skin, two or three layers in" with a "needle" that actually is a thin metal rod with seven tiny needles at its tip, said Haston, who said that first and foremost people need to make sure the tattoo artists aren't reusing needles.

"You use your needle once and dispose of them in a sharps container," to prevent passing contaminants from one client to the next.

In fact, Wilson suggested that customers insist that tattoo needles or other piercing tools, which can include scalpels, be removed from sealed packages.

Make sure the shop has at least one autoclave, the same sort of device that doctors use to sterilize surgical tools, he said. Don't be shy about asking to see it turned on.

And don't believe tattoo artists and body piercers who insist boiling their tools is enough to sterilize them, said Dr. Chris Rodarte, medical director of the Family HealthCare Network clinic on Oak Avenue in downtown Visalia.

That's because some bacteria can resist the heat of boiling, but an autoclave uses a combination of heat and pressure that more thoroughly sterilizes things. Haston said he sterilizes portions of his tattoo "gun," the device that bobs the needle up and down to insert ink into the skin.

During tattoo sessions, he also wears surgical gloves — black ones he custom orders.

He also takes other precautions to prevent cross contamination from any blood that may be on his hands or the cotton medical pads used to clean up blood and excess ink oozing out of the skin.

Haston said he throws out unused ink rather than pouring it back into the larger ink bottles and risking contaminating them with blood.

It's a series of precautions that Haston said he and most other professional tattooers he knows follow, even though he knows of no regulations on cleanliness and safety practices for tattooers and piercers.

"They've always fallen behind on these things," he said of the government.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration states on its Web site that it generally doesn't regulate inks and pigments used for tattooing and leaves regulations on applying tattoos to state governments.

In California, Assembly Bill 186 became law in January 1998. It requires the California Conference of Local Health Officers to come up with sterilization, sanitation and safety standards for businesses involved in tattooing, applying permanent makeup and body piercing.

But eight years later, the regulations that were supposed to come from those recommendations have yet to be issued, said Lea Brooks, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Health Services.

Her agency is charged with taking the doctors' recommendations — submitted in July 1998 —and creating the regulations.

So far, she said, only a draft copy of the regulations has been completed, and "in 2003, the department convened a task force to help it complete and streamline the draft regulations, and that is still occurring."

"I don't have a time estimate of when the regulations will become law," she said.

Brooks' only explanation for the delay was, "It's just taking a long time."

She said counties in California can create their own tattooing and piercing regulations, but Larry Dwoskin, director of environmental health for Tulare County, said state Assembly members behind 186 apparently wanted tattooing and body piercing rules to be consistent across the state, so the bill prohibits counties from developing regulations.

Right now, he said, all Tulare County health officials can do is investigate complaints of health problems or unsanitary conditions at body art parlors and shops and warn operators to clean up their acts or risk being shut down as public health threats.

But without any regulations, Dwoskin said, his agency can't fine any of the 21 shops his agency is aware of in Tulare County for unsafe or unsanitary practices or require them to undergo periodic health inspections.

Not that he sees a big problem with health issues among the body art shops in Tulare County.

"Within the mainstream tattooing community, they have standards they abide by," Dwoskin said. "The better shops self-regulate, for lack of a better term."

In the past three years, county health officials have received only four complaints about tattoo businesses. They included one operating in a home that reportedly didn't properly dispose of dirty needles, one for unclean conditions, one for stale cigarette smoke and one for piercing minors without parents' permission and one for tattooing people at a bar.

None involved reports of infections or other medical reactions.

Although such incidents aren't being reported to county health officials, they do happen. Rodarte said at his clinic, he has seen one case of a person who may have contracted hepatitis B during a professional tattoo application. On the other hand, he has seen several more hepatitis cases among patients who may have been infected by having tattoos applied by fellow inmates in prison.

At Sol Ink, a tattoo and body piercing shop in Tulare, anyone can buy ink, needles and other professional tattooing equipment, and for a fee the shop will sterilize equipment in an autoclave.

"All of us started out that way," doing tattoos and piercings in garages and homes, Wilson said.

But, he added, getting body art can be a perilous venture among people who don't practice proper sanitary standards whether they operate out of professional shops or in garages.

Haston agreed, saying he has seen 13-year-olds walking around with tattoos applied with guitar strings, "not the most sterile things."

And the health risks from tattoos can extend well after the ink is applied to the skin.

Though rare, small amounts of metals in some tattoo and permanent makeup inks can heat during MRI scans, said Greg Browning, a technician at Visalia Imaging and Open MRI.

Jeff Wheaton, a registered nurse who uses lasers to remove tattoos at the Laser Medical Center in Visalia, said some jailhouse and prison tattoos — made with black soot from the smoke of burning Styrofoam cups or other plastic items — mixed with toothpaste can be a cancer risk for people getting the tattoos removed.

When the laser hits that makeshift tattoo ink, "the fragments get discharged into the body." There isn't a lot of research on the effects of these particles floating in the bloodstream, but there are concerns that they are carcinogenic.

County officials credit local tattoo and piercing shops with doing a good job of preventing health risks to their clients. Dr. Karen Haught, the county's public health officer, said people need to realize that there are always risks involved with body art, and some can be deadly.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports no known cases of HIV transmitted by tattoos, but Haught said hepatitis infections do happen.

In fact, she said, "I know that hepatitis C is more prevalent in people who have tattoos."

And there are several strains of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.

Sometimes, however, the health risks have nothing to do with how the body art was applied but rather the failure of people to properly clean and care for their tattoos and piercings afterward.

For example, the American Dental Association warns that studs and other jewelry inserted into tongues can damage teeth.

Tony Bernard, a tattoo artist and body piercer at Leopard Ink, is acutely aware of that. After 11 years of wearing a metal tongue stud, he accidentally bit into it a few years ago and cracked some teeth.

"It was like \$1,800 in dental work to fix my two teeth," he said, adding that since then he has kept his tongue jewelry-free.

"A lot of people don't listen to what the piercer has to say," added Felix Delgado, owner of Sol Ink.

For example, he said, he tells clients to not touch studs or other jewelry in newly pierced sites, but some touch the jewelry anyway and end up with infections.

Wilson said some clients fail to use the proper methods to keep their piercings clean, which can result in infections or dry, painful skin around the piercing sites.

Several artists and piercers recommended finding people with body art and asking them about the person who did the work, the shop and if they had any health issues afterward.

Visiting the shop once or several times to see the conditions can help too, added Wilson.

"If you don't feel right. If you feel awkward getting a tattoo there, don't get a tattoo there," he said.

- The reporter can be reached at [dcastell@visalia.gannett.com](mailto:dcastell@visalia.gannett.com).